

Budget in final stage

Grand Theatre, Lock 4 benefit while KSU waits

Staff, Wire Reports

The fate of several key local programs will be decided as legislators meet today to discuss the final budget bill.

The Grand Theatre was one project that benefited from the conference committee that reconciled differences in the House and Senate versions of the budget. The House had approved \$488,000 for the renovation work, but the Senate cut it out.

After negotiating, the funding was restored and the money will be used to transform the theatre into a visual and performing arts center. The conference committee also added \$55 million to repair the locks and dams on the Kentucky River, including Lock 4 in Frankfort.

The status of other projects is not so clear. The House approved \$4.9 million for the renovation of Hathaway Hall at Kentucky State University, but the Senate cut it. KSU also lost \$500,000 for a business plan and \$500,000 for improvements at Blazer library. KSU president

Mary Sias said she doesn't know if the funding has been restored.

"I'm holding my breath," she wrote in an e-mail.

The Senate also cut \$8 million for a proposed expansion of the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives. State librarian Jim Nelson said it doesn't look like the funding was restored, but he's waiting for the final version approved by Gov. Ernie Fletcher.

"I'm holding my breath."

MARY SIAS, KSU president writes in a recent e-mail.

Legislative leaders huddled behind closed doors for a week to craft a budget then took a week off for a spring break, allowing themselves no time to challenge potential gubernatorial line-item vetoes.

That could pose a problem for some

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of the deals struck during their long days of secret negotiations if Fletcher exercises his veto power.

The good news for legislators: Fletcher said he has been briefed on parts of the budget proposal and doesn't know of anything in it that he would likely veto – at least at this point. However, that could change after he looks at the nearly \$18 billion behemoth.

"I will evaluate it, and try to do what's best to move the state forward," Fletcher said.

In his public appearances, Fletcher has supported many of the known budget initiatives, including \$50 million to buy classroom computers and a proposal to increase the salaries of teachers by about \$4,100 over the next two years. That's intended to move Kentucky teachers toward pay equity with their counterparts in adjoining states.

He said the spending plan, which is expected to be presented to the full House and Senate on Monday, may be the strongest for public education since 1990, when the Kentucky Education Reform Act was passed.

Under the state Constitution, the legislature can meet no longer than 60 days, and must finish its business on or before April 15. They've met 57 days so far, leaving them three days to pass the

budget and vote on other pending legislation.

Fletcher has up to 10 days after the legislature passes the budget to exercise his veto power, which means he can strike items from the budget after lawmakers have gone back home.

House Speaker Jody Richards, D-Bowling Green, said the budget crafted by legislative leaders is solid.

"I think we'll be fine," he said. "I don't believe the governor will veto anything major, and I certainly hope he doesn't."

Kendra Stewart, a political scientist at Eastern Kentucky University, said the timing of the budget vote undermines the democratic process by cutting into the system of checks and balances established under the state Constitution.

"Even though the governor is the official who everybody gets to vote for or against, he doesn't necessarily represent the views of the entire population," she said. "And so the idea is that the legislature is better at making sure various interests are represented. For every power one of the branches of government has, there is a check on that power. Giving the governor power to veto, the writers of the Kentucky Constitution were sure to give the legislature power to override that veto."

Michael Baranowski, a political scientist at Northern Kentucky University, said developing a state spending plan is a time-consuming process – and often very contentious. In fact, the General Assembly adjourned in 2002 and 2004 without passing a budget.

"That really is just part and parcel of being a part-time legislature with strict constitutional limits on how long you can meet," Baranowski said.

After a 20-hour-long meeting on March 30-31, legislative leaders went home for a weeklong break. Had they stayed, lawmakers would have had time to vote on the spending plan and get it to Fletcher in plenty of time to consider any veto overrides, if that were necessary.

Fletcher said he believes the budget agreement is a sign that Kentucky legislators are learning to cope with a Republican at the state's helm. Democrats had controlled both chambers of the General Assembly until 2000. Fletcher is the first Republican governor since 1971.

"It probably reflects a settling in, you know, a transition where we have a two-party system here in Frankfort," he said. "And so I think that's a very positive thing regarding the legislature."